BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by Mary Bosworth, Wesleyan University

Mass Imprisonment: Social Causes and Consequences edited by David Garland originated as a series of papers delivered at a day conference of the same name at NYU in 2000. The book’s contributors seek to explain why the US and, increasingly Europe, incarcerate so many people. The chapters are arranged in groups of three or four essays. The first two chapters address a general topic and then one or two subsequent papers comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the first pair. Each group of chapters is thus presented as a dialogue. At less than 200 pages, it is a good length for a supplementary text in undergraduate courses on punishment, imprisonment, and criminal justice. It provides a useful overview of a variety of issues including the war on drugs, fear of crime, and imprisonment rates.

Marc Mauer begins the collection with a clear and engaging critique of sentencing and the “tough on crime” movement in the US. Arguing eloquently for a reduction in the prison population, Mauer points out that the problem of mass imprisonment is not just the result of criminal justice policy. Both the American “culture of individualism” and a widespread failure to understand the social costs of investment in incarceration are equally to blame.

Following Maur’s analysis of society’s will to punish, Jonathan Simon considers how fear of crime legitimates punitive practices. In a sophisticated theoretical overview of work by Mary Douglas, he discusses how crime has been constructed as a risk factor against which citizens must protect themselves. According to Simon, cultural representations of fear, risk, and danger lie at the heart of the practice of mass imprisonment. Despite what criminologists say to the contrary, the public views crime as invisible, involuntary, and irreversible. People believe that crime operates through deception, absence, or surprise and is, therefore, something from which all individuals must all protect themselves.
Katherine Beckett and Bruce Western begin the next pair of chapters by mapping the connection between welfare and imprisonment. Differentiating between whites and minorities, they prove what we have all long suspected, that beginning in the 1980s, states with larger black populations are states that spent less on social welfare and also incarcerated at high levels... in the wake of the Reagan revolution, penal and welfare institutions have come to form a single policy regime aimed at the governance of social marginality (p. 46).

The accompanying chapter in this section, as in the previous one, moves in a rather different direction, by discussing the effect of US policies and experiences on Europe. According to David Downes, “having gone this route alone, the US is actively exporting [the recipe for mass incarceration], and key groups in comparable societies are eager to adopt it” (p. 56). Downes pessimistically concludes that, as European nations’ crime rates continue to grow, the shift toward mass imprisonment may become inevitable.

The subsequent pair of chapters ostensibly deal with race, although in two very different ways. Loic Wacquant describes the inter-connections between prisons and ghettos, while Elijah Anderson relates the life of an African-American former drug dealer. Waquant’s piece, which has now appeared in numerous published versions, is nonetheless still engaging. His general point, that the prison is a ghetto and that ghettos have become like prisons, is indeed worth re-stating. As usual, however, his analysis fails to take into account any means of resistance, coping, self-definition, or achievement that the African-American community may utilize. He also somewhat overstates racial divisions in prison, failing to note the effects of security level, offense, and other practical concerns on relationships formed in prison. As with all contributions to this book he ignores women and any other minority group entirely.

Anderson’s chapter is the sole ethnography in the collection. Describing the life of “Rob”, who passes from drug-dealer to community activist, Anderson provides a grounded approach to possible solutions to the problems caused by mass imprisonment. He also, refreshingly, gives his subject a sense of agency and subjectivity. Presented, however, without any mention of theoretical literature on race or punishment or even criminology, his essay is rather out of place.

The final pair of chapters by Franklin Zimring and Michael Tonry reiterates many points raised previously. Zimring provides yet more data of increased imprisonment rates in a brief chapter, while Tonry argues rather